

## Insensitivity

Every year in elementary school, I faced our school wide Multicultural festival. Kids attended dressed in the traditional styles from their cultures, ranging from kimonos to sarees. Questions flooded my head, wondering what my own culture was and how I could represent it for the festival. Growing up in a white household with minimal cultural influences from previous generations, I never knew how to participate in this well celebrated festival. One year, I arrived at school in my cheap, sequined “Spanish Dancer” costume from Halloween, attempting to pretend it was my family’s culture, completely unaware of the cultural insensitivity. That night, my parents, horrified with my actions, educated me on our family origins in Russia and Lebanon, but explained that our familial traditions didn’t carry past my grandparents’ generation. I was left confounded and almost judgemental of the cultures that were celebrated around me, because I didn’t understand why other people continued to practice their traditions when my family didn’t. The importance of my fellow classmate’s culture diminished in my mind, as I continuously felt left out of the intricate celebrations they had.

In the fifth grade, my parents enrolled me in a competitive charter school, designed for students to be challenged with a rigorous curriculum and schedule. The students who attended were diverse, primarily Asian and Indian, with a very small population of white students. This differed from any other school in my area and led to culture shock for me and my sister. Every school event centered around the celebration of Indian and Chinese culture, allowing students to dance to traditional music of drums and tanpura, and wear the outfits they felt comfortable in. Everyone around me brought homemade foods for lunch, such as curry or dumplings. Initially, I felt like an outsider, unable to relate to the references and memories my classmates shared. This abruptly changed once I made friends, as they began to invite me to religious events, cultural dances, and parties that all celebrated their religious holidays. Even small hangouts with my friends exposed me to the beautiful Bollywood soundtracks of their childhoods. I attended numerous parties dressed head to toe in colorful garments from my friend’s closets, getting painted with authentic henna and makeup. My friends always included me and incorporated their culture into my life, changing my entire perspective I had of other people’s culture.

When I was younger, I didn’t realize the lack of diversity and culture in my school. I focused on my own personal struggles with culture, and was blind to the struggles my other classmates had fitting in. They had to hide their culture and not express it, only given one day a year to celebrate their individuality. I had always viewed that day as an opportunity to leave out kids like me who didn’t have much cultural influences to celebrate, but in reality it was the one day these kids felt comfortable enough to be themselves. These kids were the minority in my elementary school, conforming to our school’s uniform and suppression of cultural differences daily. It wasn’t until I experienced being the minority at my school, and witnessed the beauty of these cultures that were too often suppressed in order to fit in, that I began to question how often this problem affected people I knew. I thought about the number of kids in my elementary school who avoided bringing traditional food for lunch, just to keep from other kids judging them for not having lunchables or a plain sandwich. I felt ashamed of my innocent, yet offensive choice to wear my “Spanish Dancer” costume, realizing how upset the people in my class who were actually hispanic might have felt. Experiencing the culture of my peers opened my eyes to traditions that were passed down from generations; traditions people should be proud of and desire to share with the world. Now, I view culture as something that should be celebrated and expressed throughout all aspects of life, because each culture has its own beauty and makes each person unique.